

# PROMOTING LIBRARY AWARENESS IN ETHNIC COMMUNITIES

Based on the experiences of the  
South Bay Cooperative Library System  
1984 - 1985

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## METHODS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH PATRONS FROM OTHER CULTURES

- Speak in brief, simple sentences rather than long, compound or complex ones. Minimize library jargon.
- Don't ask "either/or" questions pose two questions instead.
- Speak slowly and articulate distinctly. If necessary write it down for the patron. Show an individual when possible what YOU need or want.
- Don't expect verbal reinforcement such as "I see" or "Uh-huh" when you are explaining something to a patron. Watch for non-verbal communication. If you want an acknowledgement, ask "Do you understand?" or watch for a nod.
- If you see that a patron has misunderstood your direction after he or she has left your station, don't assume that the patron will eventually discover the error. Follow through with whatever assistance you can give.
- Recognize that many Asians are not demonstrative. Smiling may hide emotions such as frustration or confusion.
- Silence from patrons of some cultures, particularly Asian, should not be construed as misunderstanding or rudeness. Some other possible reasons are: 1) respect for your authority; 2) full agreement with what you are saying or doing; or 3) fear of being judged by how he or she speaks English.
- Realize that name order may be different for some cultures. Ask for "family name" instead of "last name." Women from some cultures may retain their maiden names after marriage, e.g., Vietnamese.
- Remember that Asians are generally face-saving people. Your attitude is very important. Always show mutual respect!
- Be patient.
- Keep smiling.
- If you don't understand, ask questions, but keep questions short.
- Don't ask negative questions, as these are easily misinterpreted---for example, "Don't you like mysteries?"
- Give time for the patron to accomplish what he came for, even when you are busy.
- Remember that word of mouth is more important than the written word when people are new to this country. Use contacts who understand the language when possible, and encourage personal contact.
- Get help when possible to complete a communication transaction.
- Remember that in some cultures, particularly Asian, it is considered polite to avoid eye contact. Do not construe this as an offense.
- Give time for the patron to translate mentally what you have said.
- Don't raise your voice; it may be perceived as anger.
- Avoid idioms and metaphors (e.g. "That's cool").

prepared by the Sunnyvale Public Library staff, April 1985

## **GENERAL INFORMATION ON COMMUNICATION WITH ETHNIC PATRONS**

- The American free public library system is a new concept to many people of other cultures. Libraries in many countries are few and are limited to scholars and professionals. Therefore, members of many ethnic groups lack familiarity with our libraries. Inform them of library services and resources by contacting community groups and places where ethnic patrons gather and shop, and by word-of-mouth.
- To make the library more accessible to patrons, library signs should be in key languages; e.g., the Vietnamese collection should have the identifying sign in both English and Vietnamese. Library brochures and policy can be made available in different languages and the foreign collection can be highlighted.
- Encourage ethnic groups' participation in libraries; for example, ethnic programs and oral history projects allow these groups to share their values and customs and present opportunities for staff and other patrons to learn from the people themselves.
- Many immigrants have been heavily traumatized. They feel isolated in a strange land with strange customs and a strange language.
- Most immigrant groups want to better themselves educationally, socially, economically, etc.
- Communication is critical in serving ethnic groups. Communication with these groups is a challenging task. Because education occurs in libraries, the library staff members have the opportunity to impact educational process for these groups.
- Communication breakdown results from distorted preconceptions of behavior and speech, Sensitivity, ease, body language and facial expressions are a vital part of communication.
- Try to make patrons feel welcome by gestures and smiling, but do not rush them.
- If a patron seems confused, try various approaches.
- Vietnamese are traditionally modest, soft-spoken and agreeable. Family life and love of learning are important values to them.
- Lack of eye contact by lowering eyes in Asian, Hispanic, American Indian and other cultures is a sign of respect.
- Since parents (particularly fathers in Hispanic culture) control children's activities, let them see the library as a friendly and good place for their children.

prepared the the Library Awareness Project staff, May 1985

## INDOCHINESE NAMING SYSTEM

**Vietnamese** have first, last, and usually middle names. They give their last name first, then middle name, then first. Last names are not commonly used, people being addressed as Mr., Mrs., or Miss followed by their first names. Married women retain their own last name, but may be referred to as Mrs. and the husband's first name. Children have the father's last name. Middle name 'Van' is for men, 'Thi' is for women. Common last names are Nguyen, Tran, Le, and Pham.

**Cambodians** give their last name first, then perhaps a middle name (though rare), then first name. They often go by both last and first names together, or by middle and first. Married women retain their last name, but may be referred to as Mrs. and husband's first name.

**Laotians** give first name first, then last name; no middle name. Last names are rarely used; some people actually have none. Married women change their last name to husbands'. Laotian names are long.

**Hmong** give their last name first, then first name. Some men have a middle name. People are often known or addressed by both names together. Married women retain their own last names which are monosyllabic. The most common Hmong last names (or clan names) are Chang, Chue, Fanf, Her (Heu), Khing, Kue, Lor (Lo), Ly (Les), Moua, Thao (Thor), Vang, Vue, Xiong, Yang.

In each group (except Hmong) kinship terms are used extensively in addressing family and friends. People are referred to as 'big sister X', 'aunt Y' or 'uncle Z' or simply as sister, aunt, uncle according to their age and status, even if the person is not a blood relative. Some refugees who are aware of the American system of naming may have already changed their names around accordingly, and will give their name to Americans contrary to their traditional manner.

**Pronunciation of names**- The way Indochinese names are written or transliterated was influenced by French spelling. Thus 'a' as in 'father', 'e' as in 'cafe', 'i' as in 'machine', 'ou' as in 'through'. Vietnamese 'o' and 'u' are unrounded back vowels 'o' and 'u'. 'Th' represents an aspirated consonant and is pronounced simply as English 't'; 't' represents the unaspirated variation of the same. 'Nh' is a palatalized 'n' as the Spanish 'n' 'x' is pronounced 's' in Vietnamese and Lao, 'sh' in Hmong. Diacritical marks above and below vowels in Vietnamese mark vowel value and tone.

prepared by the Indochinese Community Health and Education Project  
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## VIETNAMESE NAMES

The Vietnamese have usually three, and sometimes four names ordered on the pattern: family name, middle name, and familiar (our ‘first’) name (e.g., Doan Toan Phuc, i.e., Phuc of the family Doan). To conform to American habits and needs the refugee may have already reversed the order (e.g., Phuc Toan Doan, in the example previous), so if you have any doubt, don’t be afraid to ask. At times individuals may be known among family and friends by both middle and familiar names (e.g., Minh Duo, Americanized as (“Mindy”), but it is not improper to refer to these individuals by the familiar name only.

Pronunciation is occasionally difficult, but general approximations Usually suffice. The sound most Americans have trouble with is “ng-”, something alien to our tongue, but not that hard once you get used to it. One way to practice the sound is by pronouncing the English word sing, and hold on to the final sound. Then, start adding a second syllable to it (e.g., sing-ngo). Finally, say the ng - with the desired second syllable without using sing. There, that wasn’t so bad, was it?

### Common Family Names and Approximate Pronunciations

Nguyen (Wen)	Pham (Fahm)	Do (Doh)
Ngo (Ngho)	Phan (Fahn)	Cao (Kow)
Tran (Trun)	Ho (Hoh)	Pho (Faw)
Le (Lay)	Dinh (Ding)	Luu (Lou)
Doan (Dwon)	Ly (Lee)	Vu (Voo)

### Some Common Familiar Names and Approximate Pronunciation

Binh (Bing)	Hong (Hohng)	Son (Sun)
Cung (Koong)	Hien (Hyen)	Tam (Tum)
Chieu (Chew)	Hai (Hi)	Tan (Tun)
Cue (Kook)	Loc (Lope)	Tuyet (Twet)
Due (Dook)	Minh (Ming)	Tho (Taw)
Dao (Dow)	Mai (MY)	Thanh (Tihng or Tan)
Hoa (Hwah)	Ngoc (Ngawp)	Trac (Trook)
Hue (Hway)	Phuc (Fook)	Vinh (Ving)
Huong (Hoong)	Sang (Sahng)	Xuyen (Swen)

note: -ih- here refers to the long i sound as in sign.

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